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CLAUDIO ESKENAZI

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# FRANCE'S FIFTH REPUBLIC: TWENTY YEARS LATER

ANNCR:

THIS SPRING MARKS THE TWENTIETH ANNIVERSARY OF THE FOUNDING OF FRANCE'S FIFTH REPUBLIC...AS WE HEAR IN THIS BACKGROUND REPORT BY VOA'S CLAUDIO ESKENAZI.

NARR:

TWENTY YEARS AGO FRANCE WAS ON THE BRINK OF CIVIL WAR IN THE MIDST OF POLITICAL UPHEAVAL AND A LOSING STRUGGLE IN ALGERIA. IT WAS THEN THAT THE SIXTY-SEVEN-YEAR-OLD WORLD WAR TWO HERO GENERAL CHARLES DE GAULLE WAS CALLED BACK FROM RETIREMENT IN AN ATTEMPT TO RESCUE HIS COUNTRY FROM IMPENDING DISASTER.

DE GAULLE'S RETURN TO POWER WAS MAINLY PROMPTED BY GROWING DISSATISFACTION IN THE ARMED FORCES OVER THE WAR TO KEEP ALGERIA FRENCH. AND AFTER FOUR YEARS OF SKILLFUL MANEUVERING AND CAJOLING AND SEVERAL ATTEMPTS ON HIS LIFE, DE GAULLE GRANTED ALGERIA ITS INDEPENDENCE AND FRANCE WAS FINALLY FREE TO CONCENTRATE ON ITS OWN PRESSING DOMESTIC PROBLEMS.

ONE OF DE GAULLE'S FIRST MOVES WAS TO REFORM FRANCE'S AILING POLITICAL SYSTEM. THE OUTCOME WAS THE CREATION OF A STRONG PRESIDENCY, MODELLED AFTER THE U.S. CONSTITUTION, BUT RETAINING FEATURES OF PARLIAMENTARY RULE. SOON THEREAFTER, IN ANOTHER BOLD MOVE, DE GAULLE DISMANTLED FRANCE'S COLONIAL EMPIRE WHILE MAINTAINING CLOSE ECONOMIC AND CULTURAL TIES WITH MOST OF ITS FORMER AFRICAN POSSESSIONS.

THE FIRST YEARS OF THE FIFTH REPUBLIC SAW A RESSURGENCE OF FRENCH NATIONALISM. AT TIMES THROUGH COSTLY AND FUTILE MOVES DE GAULLE ATTEMPTED TO INFLUENCE WORLD EVENTS BY RESTORING FRANCE

TO ITS FORMER ROLE AS A GREAT POWER. SOON FRANCE EXPLODED ITS FIRST NUCLEAR BOMB AND BEGAN ITS PULLOUT FROM NATO.

THE EARLY PERIOD OF THE FIFTH REPUBLIC WAS ALSO AN AGE OF UNPRECEDENTED ECONOMIC GROWTH IN FRANCE. WHILE THIS NEW PROSPERITY WAS EVIDENT THROUGHOUT THE INDUSTRIALIZED WORLD, GAULLIST REFORMS, COUPLED WITH AN AGGRESSIVE FOREIGN ECONOMIC POLICY, HAD MUCH TO DO IN RAISING THE FRANCH STANDARD OF LIVING. BUT, BY THE END OF THE SIXTIES THIS GENERAL PROSPERITY BEGAN TO PRODUCE NEW STRAINS. FRANCE'S RURAL POPULATION, WHICH IN 1958 REPRESENTED 25 PERCENT OF THE POPULATION, WAS DOWN TO ELEVEN PERCENT TEN YEARS LATER. THE RURAL EXODUS LED TO THE GROWTH OF CITIES AND SPRAWLING SUBURBS. STILL FRENCH INSTITUTIONS REMAINED RIGID AND CENTRALIZED. AND FOR MANY, DE GAULLE ALREADY REPRESENTED A RELIC OF PAST.

ON THE TENTH ANNIVERSARY OF THE FIFTH REPUBLIC, STUDENTS AND WORKERS TOOK TO THE STREETS DEMANDING REFORMS IN A BLOODY AND BITTER CONFRONTATION WITH THE GAULLIST STATE. BUT THE "EVENTS OF MAY" -- AS THEY WERE LATER CALLED -- IN TURN MAY HAVE SERVED TO SHOW ABOVE ALL ELSE THE UNPREDICTABILITY OF FRENCH POLITICS. IN THE GENERAL ELECTION THE FOLLOWING MONTH, WHEN FRENCH VOTERS -- FACED WITH GROWING POLITICAL DISARRAY -- RETURNED THE GAULLISTS AND THEIR ALLIES TO POWER WITH THE LARGEST PARLIAMENTARY MAJORITY IN FRENCH HISTORY. ACCORDING TO A FRENCH OBSERVER, THE EVENTS OF MAY "DESTABILIZED DE GAULLE BUT STABILIZED THE FIFTH REPUBLIC".

A YEAR LATER DE GAULLE RESIGNED AFTER A DEFEAT IN A REFERENDUM VOTE ON SENATE REFORM AND DECENTRALIZATION. BUT THE FIFTH REPUBLIC SURVIVED. IF ANYTHING, THIS YEAR'S PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS HAVE PROVEN ONCE MORE THAT THE FRENCH "TALK LEFT BUT VOTE RIGHT".

PERHAPS THE FIFTH REPUBLIC'S BIGGEST ACHIEVEMENT HAS BEEN THE POLITICS OF CONSENSUS INITIATED BY DE GAULLE. NOW, CONTRARY TO TRADITIONAL FRENCH POLITICS, A WIDE CONSENSUS OF BOTH MAJORITY AND OPPOSITION SUPPORT THE BASIC PRINCIPLES OF A SOCIETY AND OF ITS POLITICAL SYSTEM.

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